

Comments from JABA Readers

BEHAVIOR ANALYSIS IN ACTION

There are opportunities all around for behavior analysts to make a contribution to the culture. Some are big and important. Others are small but perhaps interesting. Upon reading this "Letter to the Editor" in my local paper, I thought it important to respond with a behavioral perspective.

Banish Terrorist Geese

Tallahassee is an exceptionally nice town filled with nature's own pure beauty. Tom Brown Park is one of the best examples of this good quality of Tallahassee, and the park could be an ideal place for family picnics if not for one problem.

Our family was enjoying Tom Brown Park's beautiful scenery and good picnic tables a couple of weeks ago when our peaceful picnic was disturbed by a noisy and aggressive group of geese. These creatures were totally crazy and so insolent in begging for food that we couldn't do anything but leave a loaf of bread for them and escape to our car as quickly as possible. We later succeeded in resuming our picnic at a different table not so near the pond where the geese were.

Of course, the geese belong to nature and they have their rights too, but I think these individuals have gone too far and something should be done. I talked to other people in the park, and they all had the same experience with the geese. It is not fair that one group can terrorize the whole park so that peace-loving taxpayers can't use it freely.

These barbarous animals should be moved to a desert lake immediately. Swans could be a good choice instead. At least they are more beautiful, and probably can behave themselves better than geese.

So, why let some animals ruin the best picnic place in Tallahassee? Without the geese, Tom Brown Park would be a perfect park.

KEITH RAUTIAINEN

(*Tallahassee Democrat*, Feb. 18, 1986)

Park-Goers Can Teach 'Terrorist' Geese to be Gentle

Banishing the "terrorist geese" from Tom Brown Park will not solve the basic problem that Keith Rautiainen described in his Feb. 18 letter. The noisy, aggressive behavior that they display has no doubt been accidentally trained by scores of picnickers to the park over the past few months.

Imagine geese, somewhat food deprived due to the winter season, approaching a toddler clutching a handful of bread crumbs who wants to "feed the ducks." The geese race toward the child, the frightened child drops the crumbs and runs. Over the course of days and weeks, the geese learn to approach more and more noisily and aggressively for an intermittent payoff of dropped food. Along comes Mr. Rautiainen and his family and the geese get the grand reward for their noisy, aggressive display—an entire loaf of bread!

Similar behavior is seen all the time in grocery stores and malls as frustrated parents give tantruming children snacks and treats to "be quiet." Such disruptive behavior is learned; taught by unwitting behavior-shapers who lack an understanding of the basic principles of behavior.

Ignore the geese when they approach and hold your ground. Don't attempt to feed them out of your hand. Throw the bread crumbs over their heads away from you. They will chase the bread. If you stop, they may approach you again. Simply

repeat the procedure and within a short time they will "behave themselves." (I tested this procedure the morning I wrote this letter and it works.)

Should the Tallahassee Parks and Recreation Department replace geese with swans, I would predict that, given accidental conditioning of aggression by an unwary public, the swans, too, will become "terrorists." Reinforce cooperation and you will get peaceful behavior; reinforce aggression and you get terrorists (animal and human).

An excellent paperback book describing the

principles of behavior and their practical applications with animals, children and spouses is "Don't Shoot the Dog!" by Karen Pryor, and published by Bantam Books (1985).

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